

Gifted children's relationships with teachers

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Educators exert a tremendous influence on gifted children's academic and social-emotional development, thus their perceptions of these students is critical. Many factors are associated with a successful classroom experience for the gifted child, and the classroom teacher plays a vital role in that success. The teacher influences not only the academic side of classroom life, but the personal one as well. There is a growing research interest in the interpersonal relationship between teacher and child and how it affects the child's experience in the classroom (Pianta, 1992, Kesner, 2000), but this research has not been systematically applied to the study of gifted children.

Psychology, relationships, adjustment, counselling, gifted

INTRODUCTION

There has been much debate regarding the psychological adjustment of gifted children. Seemingly contradictory views have found support in the literature. One view suggests that, because of their gifts, gifted children are more likely to be better adjusted psychologically than their non-gifted counterparts (Baker, 1995). Likewise, an opposing view, that gifted children are actually at risk because of their intellectual abilities, has also received support (Neihart, 1999). It is possible that both arguments have validity. Gifted children may be savvier than their non-gifted counterparts when it comes to their behaviour and responses in research studies and thus appear better adjusted, yet in reality have the kinds of social and emotional difficulties described by the professionals who work with them everyday.

In support of this idea, McCallister and Nash (1996), state that when examining the empirical literature, gifted children appear to be as well or better adjusted than their non-gifted counterparts. However, they point out that outside of the empirical study, the picture is somewhat different. Educators and counsellors in the field of gifted education describe the gifted children they work with as having more social/emotional difficulties than their non-gifted counterparts. These difficulties include problems in social relationships, isolation from peers, anxiety and depression, difficulty in accepting criticism, nonconformity, and resistance to authority, boredom in school, excessive competitiveness and poor study habits (Delisle, 1992). In addition, VanTassel-Baska (2000) reported that as many as 63 per cent of gifted children are underachievers and show a record of truancy.

Stemming from research on child-parent relationships, the focus on interpersonal child-teacher relationships has utilised an attachment theory framework (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1982). Traditional attachment theory focuses on the development of a close emotional bond between a child and the primary caregiver (usually the mother) and the impact the quality of this relationship has on the child's development. Attachment theory posits that in addition to their parents, children form close attachments to other significant adults in their lives, and that these relationships may also influence their development. Perhaps there is no other non-familial adult who is more

significant in a child's life than his or her teacher. It has even been suggested that secure relationships with secondary caregivers (that is, teachers) may compensate for insecure attachment relationships with parents (Van IJzendoorn and Tavecchio, 1987).

There are many similarities between the child-parent relationship and the child-teacher relationship (Howes and Hamilton, 1992; Pianta, 1992). School can be very stressful for children and they may look to the teacher for the same sort of emotional security that they rely on in a secure attachment relationship with their parents. In addition, there is evidence that suggests a correlation between the quality of the child-teacher relationship and children's social and academic behaviour in the classroom. As found in child-parent attachment research, children who have secure relationships with their teachers have been found to be more socially competent and do better in school than those who have an insecure relationship (Howes, Matheson and Hamilton, 1994). A secure child-teacher relationship is characterised by generally positive affect and low levels of conflict with the child feeling safe and secure and able to use his/her teacher as a secure base (Bowlby, 1988) for exploration and learning. Pianta and Steinberg (1992) suggest that the child-teacher relationship can even serve as a protective factor for children at risk for academic failure. They report that children predicted to be retained at the beginning of kindergarten, but were not retained, had more secure relationships with their teacher compared to those who were retained.

Gifted Children and Their Teachers

The interpersonal relationship between a gifted child and his/her teacher is unique. Although intellectually advanced, gifted children's socio-emotional development may be more age appropriate. This asynchronous development may present problems for the gifted child in their interactions with adults as their maturity level is often expected to match their cognitive level (Neihart, 1999). Additionally, gifted children tend to suffer from the often disabling effects of perfectionism which may contribute to chronic underachievement. Perfectionism is perhaps the most common and also most overlooked trait associated with giftedness (Silverman, 1999). Perfectionism may negatively affect as many as 89 per cent of gifted students (Orange, 1997). Perfectionistic tendencies in gifted children may manifest themselves in the classroom as procrastination in starting assignments, delay or unwillingness to turn in completed assignments, and reluctance to participate unless certain of the correct response (Nugent, 2000). Often gifted children feel the need to live up to unrealistic expectations, sometimes self imposed or imposed by others. Failure to live up to these expectations can result in a variety of problems for gifted students. These problems range from underachievement to depression and other more serious personality disorders (Hewitt and Dyck, 1996; Rasmussen and Eisen, 1992). Thus, the social/emotional problems that may affect gifted children, present unique challenges to the classroom teacher and suggests that developing a secure relationship with gifted children is critical and at the same time more difficult than doing so with their non-gifted counterparts.

With evidence that a positive child-teacher relationship enhances children's academic and social competence in non-gifted children, applying this theoretical framework to the gifted child's relationship with his/her teacher is a worthwhile exercise. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine and compare teachers' perspectives of their interpersonal relationship with gifted and non-gifted children utilising an attachment theory framework. Given that educational personnel generally report that gifted children suffer more social and emotional difficulties in the classroom compared to their non-gifted counterparts, it was hypothesised that teachers of gifted students would report less positive relationships as compared to reports by teachers of non-gifted children.

METHODS

Sample

This study was conducted in a large metropolitan area of the south-eastern United States.

Subjects for the study included 1st through 5th grade gifted and non-gifted students from schools in the catchment area. Given the lack of a clear definition of giftedness in the literature and the concomitant difficulties in identifying gifted children, the term non-gifted refers to the group of children not currently identified as gifted. It is possible that within this group there may have been some unidentified gifted children; however, random selection by their teacher for inclusion in the study controls for this possibility. The non-gifted children came from schools in the same catchment area. Gifted students were recruited through their participation in a Saturday morning educational enrichment program. Enrolment in this program meant that the students met state criteria for giftedness.

Teachers of gifted students ($n=95$) were primarily white (83%), females (82%), with an average age of 41 years and had taught for an average of 17 years. Teachers of non-gifted children ($n=162$) were exclusively white (100%) and primarily female (96%) with an average age of 37 years. This group of teachers had been teaching for an average of 11 years.

Approximately two-thirds of the gifted children in this study were White (65%). A little over one-half were male (57%), with an average age of 9.5 years. The demographics of non-gifted children were very similar to the gifted children (48% male and 74% White); however, the average age of non-gifted children was 8 years. Statistical analyses were conducted to determine if any of the groups differed significantly on any of the demographic variables. Results of these analyses are discussed in the Results section.

Instrument

The Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (Pianta, 1991) is a 28-item self-report measure designed to assess a teacher's perceptions about his/her relationship with a particular student, the student's interactive behaviour, and how the teacher thinks the student feels about him/her. Principle components analysis yielded three significant subscales: (1) Conflict, (2) Closeness, and (3) Dependency.

The Conflict subscale examines teachers' perceptions regarding the conflicting nature of their relationship with students that may evoke anger in the teacher. Pianta (1991) reported that this factor accounted for 30 per cent of the total variance. Items such as "This child and I are always struggling with each other", "Dealing with this child drains my energy", and "When this child arrives in a bad mood, I know we are in for a long day" loaded heavily on this factor. This subscale was calculated by summing 12 items so that a higher score indicates that the teacher perceives more conflict in the relationship with the child.

The Closeness subscale assesses overall security in the relationship by focusing on the teacher's positive feelings about the child and vice versa (for example, emotional and physical affection). Pianta (1991) reported that this factor accounted for 13 per cent of the total variance. Items such as "This child shares personal information with me.", and "It's easy to know what this child is feeling." loaded heavily on this factor. The Closeness subscale score was calculated by summing 11 items from the STRS with a higher score indicating more closeness in the relationship as perceived by the teacher.

The third subscale, Dependency, focuses on teachers' perceptions regarding the dependent nature of the child-teacher relationship. Pianta (1991) reported that this factor accounted for six per cent of the total variance. Items such as "This child is overly dependent on me", and "This child

expresses hurt and jealousy when I spend time with other children” loaded most heavily on this factor. The Dependency subscale was calculated by summing five items from the STRS with higher scores indicating greater perceived dependency in the relationship.

Pianta (1991) reports good internal reliability on all subscales. Coefficient alphas for Conflict, Closeness, and Dependency, were reported as 0.92, 0.86, and 0.64 respectively. In the present study, coefficient alphas were 0.92, 0.88, and 0.61 respectively.

Procedure

Teachers of the gifted children in this study were contacted by the researcher through the child’s parents. They were asked to complete the STRS and return it in a postage-paid envelope provided by the researcher. Teachers of non-gifted children were contacted by mail and asked for their participation in a study of child-teacher relationships. Teachers of non-gifted children were instructed to select a child at random from their classroom and complete the STRS on that child. The return rate for teachers of gifted students was 32 per cent and 45 per cent for teachers of non-gifted students. The final sample consisted of 95 reports of gifted child-teacher relationships and 162 reports of non-gifted child-teacher relationships.

RESULTS

First, t-tests were performed to determine if the groups (gifted and non-gifted) differed on any demographic variables (age, gender or race). Gender and race were dummy-coded to enable their use in a t-test. Results indicated that there were significantly more white children in the gifted group ($t_{(255)}=1.96, p < 0.05$). The gifted group also contained significantly older children ($t_{(255)}=5.72, p < 0.001$). The two groups did not differ significantly on child gender. Similar tests were carried out on teacher demographics to assess any significant differences between teachers of gifted and non-gifted. Results indicated that significant differences between the two groups of teachers on race and number of years teaching. There were significantly fewer White teachers in the gifted group ($t_{(255)}=5.05, p < 0.001$) and this group had significantly more teaching experience compared to teachers of non-gifted students ($t_{(249)}=7.56, p < 0.001$).

Next, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was utilised to determine whether there was an effect of the independent grouping variable (gifted) on the dependent variables (Closeness, Conflict, and Dependency). Because of the demographic differences between the two groups, child age, child race, teacher race and number of years teaching were covaried. When significant MANCOVAs were found, they were followed up with analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to determine more specifically the relationship between the independent and the dependent variables.

The MANCOVA indicated a significant main effect for the grouping variable (gifted) ($F_{(3, 229)}=123.9, p < 0.001$). Because the MANCOVA was significant, ANCOVAs were computed for each of the three STRS subscales. Child age, child race, teacher race and number of years teaching were again covaried in the ANCOVAs. Results of the ANCOVAs revealed a significant main effect of the grouping variable (gifted) on teachers’ reports of Conflict ($F_{(1, 231)}=11.03, p < 0.01$) and Dependency ($F_{(1, 231)}=223.1, p < 0.001$). Examination of the means indicated that teachers reported significantly less conflict in their relationships with gifted students as compared to reports from teachers of non-gifted students. Teachers of gifted students also reported that they perceived more dependency in their relationships with students as compared to teachers of non-gifted students. Differences between gifted and non-gifted groups amounted to a 4.8 point difference on the Conflict subscale and a 5.3 point difference on the Dependency subscale. Given the range of the Conflict and Dependency subscale, these differences represent a 10 per cent and a 22 per cent difference between gifted and non-gifted students respectively.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study ran contrary to what was expected. The hypothesis that teachers of gifted students would report a less positive relationship than teachers of non-gifted students was not supported. Teachers of gifted students reported lower levels of conflict when compared to reports by teachers of non-gifted students. Both groups of teachers reported similar levels of closeness in their relationships with students. Thus, the same level of closeness and lower levels of conflict suggest a more positive relationship between teachers and gifted students as compared to teachers of non-gifted students.

The higher degree of dependency in the teacher-gifted child relationship is somewhat ambiguous, and thus more difficult to interpret. Teachers of gifted students perceived a higher degree of dependency in their relationships than did teachers of non-gifted students. However, it is difficult to assess whether the reported level of dependency had any type of negative impact on the student-teacher relationship. Over-dependency in any relationship cannot be considered a positive attribute, yet a certain amount of dependency is natural in the teacher-child relationship. Children are dependent upon their teacher for many things in the classroom, least of which is provision of the appropriate academic challenges. Gifted students, by virtue of their advanced intellectual capabilities may be even more dependent upon the teacher to provide for their specific academic needs. In addition, the level of dependency reported by all teachers (gifted and non-gifted) was generally low given the range of possible scores. However, the 22 per cent difference in scores and the level of significance ($p < 0.001$) suggests that there were real differences in the level of dependency between two groups.

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) list several characteristics of highly successful gifted teachers that underscore the role of the interpersonal teacher-child relationship. NAGC has long recognised that meeting gifted students' affective needs is as important as meeting their academic needs. As listed in Croft (2003), NAGC suggests that a highly successful teacher of the gifted is able to inspire and motivate students, reduce tension and anxiety for gifted students and appreciate their high levels of sensitivity. A teacher must have a positive interpersonal relationship with his/her gifted students in order to accomplish these things. The results from this study indicate that this type of relationship is possible. These positive relationships with gifted students suggest that teachers were able to meet the affective needs of the gifted students in their classrooms.

Future research should utilise direct observation of teacher-child classroom interactions in order to discern the differences in the interactions between teachers and their gifted and non-gifted students. In addition, future research should assess any academic impact of a more positive teacher-child relationship. Questions related to academic achievement and teacher-child attachment relationships should be addressed in relation to gifted students. For example, are gifted students with more positive relationships with their teachers less likely to be underachievers or perfectionistic as compared to those with less positive relationships?

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996, p.iii) suggests that "good teachers literally save lives". Gifted students are even more profoundly affected by the interactions they have with their teachers compared to other students (Croft, 2003). Relationships with significant adults can either aid or hinder virtually all of children's activities. After their parents, teachers are perhaps the most significant adults in a young child's life. Teachers are in a unique position to either nurture or stifle positive relationships with children, and thereby exert a tremendous influence on their development. An effective teacher must recognise the gifted child's unique abilities and needs and provide the appropriate curricula challenges along with the appropriate affective environment.

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